

11/15/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 12 (premium)

Every Monday, we will be running a weekly series titled "State of the Big Ten," which will be made available to all members of HawkeyeDrive.com. This series of columns will focus on one major headline regarding the conference and go in-depth on the subject at hand.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

This is an interesting week in the Big Ten, to say the least.

It almost seems rare that every Big Ten football game on a given Saturday afternoon in the fall can have some sort of significant storyline to it, but that is exactly the case on Nov. 20. Not only are the three remaining conference title contenders all playing in separate games, but there are two other intriguing match-ups taking place.

At 11 a.m. Central on the Big Ten Network, Penn State plays Indiana. The reason why this game is interesting is because it was supposed to be a home game for the Hoosiers. However, an agreement was made back in September of 2009 that allowed Indiana to move this home game to FedEx Field, which is the home of the NFL's Washington Redskins.

While this is not the first time Indiana has moved a home game against Penn State to a different locale (the Hoosiers and Nittany Lions played at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis back in 2000), what makes this so unusual is that by moving this game to Landover, Md., which according to Mapquest is approximately 211 miles from Penn State's campus.

In other words, this is virtually going to be a home game for

the Nittany Lions, even if the logo at midfield and the end zones prove to suggest otherwise.

Then there is an even more fascinating scene in Big Ten football this weekend when Illinois and Northwestern battle one another in a 2:30 p.m. Central game on ESPNU. This game was originally supposed to be played at Northwestern. But instead of playing at Ryan Field in Evanston, the Wildcats and Fighting Illini are going to play each other on Nov. 20 in Chicago ... at Wrigley Field.

Yes, Wrigley Field, where the Chicago Cubs play baseball. Now there was a time when the Chicago Bears played their games at "The Friendly Confines," but they've resided at Soldier Field since the 1971.

This marks the first college football game there since 1938 (coincidentally, a year the Cubs went to the World Series) and the first football game of any kind in 40 years.

Now while Indiana's decision to move its Penn State game from Bloomington to Landover was purely a decision revolving around money, there's more to this Wrigley Field gimmick for Northwestern, a program that has really tried to market itself as "Chicago's Big Ten team" given Evanston's proximity to The Windy City.

This move has potential to pay off for the Wildcats. ESPN decided to have "College GameDay" air from outside Wrigley Field, meaning that Northwestern is going to receive perhaps even more national exposure than it initially bargained for by doing this. Add to it that this game comes against an in-state rival in Illinois, and surely one can expect there to be plenty of orange mixed in with the purple and white expected to be on hand this weekend on Chicago's North Side.

Looking at the big picture, it is understandable when someone suggests that neither Memorial Stadium in Bloomington or Ryan Field in Evanston have the same sort of atmosphere that a

place like Kinnick Stadium, Camp Randall Stadium, Beaver Stadium, The Horseshoe or The Big House have. But at the same time, Indiana and Northwestern are two football programs who, like this or not, believe playing these off-campus home games are in their best interests long-term.

Maybe they are. Maybe Indiana believes the \$3 million it is getting for moving its game with Penn State to the nation's capital is going to pay huge dividends for its athletics department. Maybe Northwestern believes it will have more of a local appeal in athletics, specifically football, by playing its home game against an in-state rival inside one of the oldest baseball stadiums there is in this country.

Either way, it will be interesting to see how these two specific situations unfold, in addition to the current Big Ten race right now between No. 11 Michigan State, No. 8 Ohio State, and No. 6 Wisconsin.

11/8/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 11 (premium)

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By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

A few weeks back, homage was paid the direction of Ohio State

head coach Jim Tressel after he won his 100th career game at the Buckeye helm.

Last weekend in State College, Pa., history was made when legendary Penn State head coach Joe Paterno earned his 400th career coaching victory after the Nittany Lions defeated Northwestern, 35-21. Paterno became the first Division-I head coach ever to reach this plateau, and it would be foolish to not recognize this feat for what it is – remarkable.

Not only does he have 400 wins as a college football head coach, but all of them have come at Penn State.

Paterno first took over in 1966. To put this into a football perspective, his first season as Penn State's coach happened to be the first NFL/AFL seasons that the two leagues would decide a world champion in a game against one another that has taken on a life of its own as the "Super Bowl."

Throughout his tenure at Penn State, there have been nine U.S. presidents, including current commander-in-chief Barack Obama. Simply put, there aren't many people at his age that can still do their jobs as well as Paterno has done his.

He has coached the Nittany Lions to two national championships, one of which came during the 1986 season after a stunning Fiesta Bowl win over Miami (Fla.). Since Penn State officially began competing in the Big Ten back in 1993, it has won the conference three times, most recently in 2008. Entering the school's 18th season in the Big Ten, Paterno has taken the Nittany Lions to two Rose Bowls, a Fiesta Bowl, and an Orange Bowl. Penn State has won three of those four marquee games, one of which capped a perfect 12-0 season in 1994. He also won a Sugar Bowl back when Penn State was still an independent, and a Cotton Bowl back when that was considered an elite bowl game.

But perhaps the one trait that stands out about Paterno is that nothing negative (at least publicly) seems to be said

about the way he coaches or about his reputation or Penn State's reputation as a football program.

This is worth bringing up considering how programs like SMU, Auburn, Florida State, USC, etc., have all during this time been forced to vacate wins and were put on probation, preventing them from playing in bowls (USC is currently serving this now). Paterno has never been forced to vacate a single one of his 400 victories. Penn State has never been on probation, never received a punishment of not being allowed to play in a bowl. Everything Paterno's program has done through his tenure has been decided on the field, where it should be decided.

What makes a moment like what was witnessed inside Beaver Stadium two days ago even more special was how it was done. Consider that Penn State was trailing Northwestern 21-0 with under a minute remaining in the first half. The Wildcats managed to suck any life out of the 100,000-plus fans who attended.

But the Nittany Lions never quit. They were able to march 91 yards down the field in 53 seconds, and scored their first touchdown of the game right before halftime. From there, Penn State managed to open the floodgates.

With the first possession of the second half, the Nittany Lions scored another touchdown. Suddenly, what was a 21-point Northwestern lead was trimmed to single digits. Then Penn State's defense began to click, forcing 3-and-outs. It was the perfect storm for a comeback win.

The victory tied the largest deficit overcome by a Paterno-coached team – down 21-0 at Illinois during Penn State's magical 1994 season only to come from behind and win, 35-31. That was on the road. This was at home.

This win made Penn State bowl-eligible for the sixth consecutive year, a streak dating back to when the Nittany

Lions won the Big Ten in 2005.

Finally, consider the opponent. Northwestern, a team with a coach in Pat Fitzgerald that many view as the second coming of Paterno (well, sort of) in terms of potential longevity with one program. If those predictions ever do come to fruition, this 400th win for Paterno becomes more and more memorable long after he is gone.

Right now, the odds of that actually happening are slim, but who knows? All that matters today is that there is one head coach in college football who has not only done more for his school than anyone else, but perhaps more for the sport of college football than anyone else.

That man is Joe Paterno.

11/1/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 10 (premium)

Every Monday, we will be running a weekly series titled "State of the Big Ten," which will be made available to all members of HawkeyeDrive.com. This series of columns will focus on one major headline regarding the conference and go in-depth on the subject at hand.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

The month of November is here, and after Iowa defeated Michigan State last weekend, 37-6, the Big Ten championship race is suddenly one of the most intriguing headlines right now in college football.

Four teams – No. 7 Wisconsin, No. 8 Ohio State, No. 15 Iowa, and No. 16 Michigan State – are all tied in the loss column with one apiece. The crazy part of this is that while all four teams each control their destiny for a share of the Big Ten crown, none of them currently control their destiny for a berth in the Rose Bowl, or any BCS bowl game for that matter.

Assuming none of these four teams lose in the next couple of weeks, either the Buckeyes or Hawkeyes will be eliminated from the race after they meet on Nov. 20 at Kinnick Stadium in Iowa City. That game is easily the biggest during this final four-week stretch of Big Ten play.

Iowa (6-2, 3-1) appears on paper to have the toughest schedule of this quartet of contenders. That showdown against Ohio State is the only home game remaining for the Hawkeyes, while they still have three road games at Indiana, Northwestern, and Minnesota remaining. Keep in mind that the Wildcats have won two straight over Iowa, and four of the last five meetings they've had with the Hawkeyes.

For Iowa to earn a berth in Pasadena, it is pretty simple. The Hawkeyes would need to win all four of their remaining games, and have Wisconsin lose one of its final four contests since the Badgers won head-to-head 31-30 back on Oct. 23.

Meanwhile, the Buckeyes (8-1, 4-1) have their bye this week, and have home games with Penn State and Michigan remaining in addition to the showdown in Iowa City. Ohio State has the most difficult scenario to decipher because it will all depend on how the final BCS rankings look on Dec. 5. The Buckeyes already lost to Wisconsin, 31-18, and do not play Michigan State this season.

Unless Wisconsin were to stumble sometime in November, Ohio State's only shot at Pasadena would be to win its final three games and hope Michigan State wins out as well, creating a three-way tie. If this were to happen, the Buckeyes could get

the Big Ten's BCS bid if they finish higher in the final BCS standings than both an 11-1 Wisconsin and 11-1 Michigan State.

Although the Spartans (8-1, 4-1) are coming off their first loss of the season, their chances of going to Pasadena remain strong. The scenario for Michigan State to make its first Rose Bowl in 23 years would need the following to happen: The Spartans would have to win out, then hope Iowa beats Ohio State and eliminates the Buckeyes, and for the Badgers to win out as well. Michigan State beat Wisconsin 34-24 on Oct. 2, and that would be the deciding factor if they both finish 11-1 and Iowa is 10-2, because the Hawkeyes' loss to Arizona on Sept. 18 would prevent their win over the Spartans last weekend from coming into play.

Michigan State's November schedule includes two straight home games against Minnesota and Purdue with a bye week in between, and then a trip to State College, Pa., to play Penn State in the regular season finale.

Finally, there's Wisconsin (7-1, 3-1), who probably has the best chance right now of playing in the Rose Bowl. The Badgers would need to win their four remaining games and get to 11-1. If this happens, the Badgers go to Pasadena if either Michigan State loses one of its final three games, or if the Spartans win out, if Ohio State also wins out and Wisconsin remains ahead of the Buckeyes in the final BCS standings.

If Iowa were to beat Ohio State, then the Badgers would need the Spartans to lose one more game, otherwise Michigan State holds the head-to-head tiebreaker on Wisconsin.

As complicated as all of this sounds, here is what does seem clear: On Jan. 1, 2011, one of these four teams will represent the Big Ten in Pasadena, Calif. If all four teams continue to win over the next two weeks, the picture will be more in focus on Nov. 20 after Iowa and Ohio State play.

It also seems likely the Big Ten gets a second BCS team that

goes to either the Sugar Bowl on Jan. 4 in New Orleans, La., or the Orange Bowl on Jan. 3 in Miami, Fla. If this does happen, then the Capital One and Outback Bowls are there for whoever from this group of four remains leftover.

And if the worst-case scenario is a trip to Tampa, Fla., to play in the Outback Bowl against a beatable SEC opponent, that does not sound too awful.

In the final season before a Big Ten championship game decides everything, this title race is going to be memorable, one way or another.

10/25/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 9 (premium)

Every Monday, we will be running a weekly series titled "State of the Big Ten," which will be made available to all members of HawkeyeDrive.com. This series of columns will focus on one major headline regarding the conference and go in-depth on the subject at hand.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

Two weeks from now, the 2010-11 men's college basketball season officially tips off in the Big Ten when the Illinois Fighting Illini host UC-Irvine.

With this in mind, as well as the conference holding its annual Media Day this week, now is as good a time as ever to discuss the outlook of the Big Ten.

Simply put, the conference is loaded. There was a recent article published in *Sports Illustrated* calling the Big Ten this year's top conference in college basketball. This sentiment is shared by many college basketball experts.

When the Coaches poll was released last week – the first AP poll comes out Oct. 28 – Michigan State and Ohio State were both preseason top 5. Purdue would have probably been a top 5 team coming into this season as well, but another ACL injury to forward Robbie Hummel has lowered national expectations for the Boilermakers.

Despite the loss of Hummel, however, Purdue is still going to have both E'Twaun Moore and JaJuan Johnson at its disposal, and should be a solid contender for this year's Big Ten crown.

Meanwhile, Michigan State is coming off two consecutive appearances in the Final Four, and managed to keep head coach Tom Izzo from bolting for the NBA over the summer. The Spartans are as good a thing as there is going in college basketball right now.

Ohio State comes in as the conference's defending champion in both the regular season and the Big Ten tournament. The Buckeyes did lose Big Ten Player of the Year Evan Turner, who went second overall in the 2010 NBA Draft to the Philadelphia 76ers. But they did add one of the nation's top recruits this season when Jared Sullinger came on board.

There are four other teams that are also going to receive some publicity this season as far as NCAA Tournament expectations are concerned. Illinois is coming off a season that saw the Fighting Illini make a deep run into the NIT. However, Illinois does bring back Demetri McCamey and adds a point guard in freshman Jereme Richmond. Some prognosticators like ESPN's Doug Gottlieb have said on record that the Fighting Illini will win the Big Ten.

Minnesota and Wisconsin both come off seasons resulting in

NCAA Tournament appearances. The Golden Gophers were very fortunate being able to make a run to the Big Ten Tournament championship game, where they lost to Ohio State. Even more vital for Minnesota is that Trevor Mbakwe will be eligible to play this season after being ruled ineligible one season ago.

As for the Badgers, they were in the thick of the Big Ten title race until the final weeks of the season last year, and lost to Cornell in the second round. The biggest key contributor returning to Wisconsin this season is forward Jon Leuer.

Finally, there is Northwestern. It has been well-documented over the past few seasons about how the Wildcats have never participated in the NCAA Tournament. The Wildcats received a major blow in the offseason when Kevin Coble, who missed all of last season with an ACL injury, elected not to return for what would be his senior year. A year ago, Northwestern got awfully close to dancing, but late season-losses to teams such as Iowa and Penn State made the Wildcats settle for the NIT.

Even without Coble this year, the Wildcats bring back some valuable pieces from last season's team, including John Shurna, who was one of the conference's leading scorers.

The other questions surrounding the Big Ten are as follows: Will Indiana continue to improve under Tom Crean, How will Fran McCaffery fare in his first season at Iowa, how will Michigan respond from losing both Manny Harris and DeShawn Sims, and who else besides Talor Battle will be a contributor for Penn State.

All in all, this is going to make for an interesting season of basketball in the Big Ten. The conference has a chance to make a resounding statement nationally, something it really hasn't been able to do in quite some time.

If the Big Ten is able to get seven in the tourney field come March, including Northwestern, this season could go down as

one of the better seasons the conference as a whole ever has.

10/18/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 8 (premium)

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By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

The news from last weekend of Minnesota relieving head football coach Tim Brewster does not come as a surprise. What is unusual is how everything transpired.

Coming into the 2010 season, there was certainly pressure on Brewster. He came to the Twin Cities with very high aspirations and exuded confidence in his product. Basically, he was a heck of a salesman.

But while the selling of a product is all fine and well, the actual product has to live up to its standards, which was absolutely not the case here.

For all the heat Brewster took on his way out, and justifiably so given who Minnesota was losing games to and how it was losing those games, he can't be the only one to blame for the debacle that has taken place.

Before this year, there had to be reason for fans of the

Golden Gophers to feel excited. The team was back on campus, playing in a brand-new, state-of-the-art stadium that was built on the Minnesota campus. The Golden Gophers seemed to finally fit in, if you will, with their Big Ten counterparts.

The timing of Brewster's hire made some sense back in 2007. Go back and watch how Minnesota absolutely unraveled in that 2006 Insight Bowl loss to Texas Tech, a game the Golden Gophers were winning 38-7 in the second half. If a head coach cannot maintain a 31-point second-half lead in a bowl game, that is discouraging, especially when Brewster's predecessor, Glen Mason, had a reputation for this throughout his Minnesota tenure.

Simply put, there was a reason Minnesota athletics director Joel Maturi went the direction he did, and at the time, who was blaming him?

Now the actual hire of Brewster maybe did not make the most sense from a coaching standpoint. But remember, this was 2007. Minnesota needed someone that was going to sell recruits on TCF Bank Stadium. Brewster did exactly that. With having the team no longer sharing the Metrodome with two professional sports franchises, there was an opportunity for those who remembered the Golden Gophers' glory days to be re-engaged with the program, and for that matter, the university. Brewster took advantage.

What made it difficult to take Brewster seriously those first couple of years, however, was that all the talk about his program was more centered around building towards the future, as opposed to what was actually happening on the field. Even in 2008, Minnesota started the season 7-1 and was nationally-ranked before nose-diving the rest of the way to finish 7-6.

Unfortunately for Brewster, that was around the time when the attention he craved finally came Minnesota's way.

No one can criticize the man for his passion or for the energy

he provided. What he can be, and should be, judged on though is how ill-prepared he was for that big moment when everything else fell into place.

This may have been Brewster's first head-coaching gig, but in hindsight, that should have been enough of a red flag to not hire him in the first place, even though he knew his talking points to a "T" like a politician.

Which leads to Maturi, who better get this next hire right, or he will be toast. Based on what has been reported the past couple of days, the conclusion could be made that the success of the football program at Minnesota is not as important as other sports.

Yes, TCF Bank Stadium was built. But it holds 50,805 seats. Brewster made the ill-advised comment in August that "TCF Bank Stadium is the best stadium in the Big Ten," when there are three stadiums in the conference that carry twice the capacity.

With the Big Ten adding Nebraska and having two divisions for football starting next season, Minnesota needs to worry less about perception now and become more committed to having a winner on the gridiron. Winning games is how revenue is made, how fans become interested, and how the Golden Gophers can someday soon have a true home-field advantage when they play at TCF Bank Stadium.

Whoever comes in to rebuild this program has an opportunity to turn Minnesota into what it once was, and the resources to do that are firmly in place. But it will take time.

There was a legit reason for Maturi hiring Brewster three years ago, but that particular reason should have been lower on the totem pole of factors into Maturi's decision-making.

That is why the Golden Gophers are where they are right now.

10/11/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 7 (premium)

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By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

When Alabama was defeated by South Carolina last weekend, fans in Columbus, Ohio had every reason to celebrate.

With Ohio State being ranked No. 2 before manhandling Indiana at The Horseshoe on Oct. 9, it was only appropriate that the Buckeyes would become the country's new No. 1 team in every poll released, including the season's first BCS standings.

Being No. 1 is nothing new to this football program, which for close to a decade now has been the Big Ten's crème de la crème. This is attributed mainly to one man – head coach Jim Tressel.

And it is fitting that after Tressel won his 100th career game as Ohio State's head coach, this is where the Buckeyes would be.

No head coach in Big Ten history has reached 100 victories faster than Tressel. The man nicknamed "Sweater Vest" is halfway through his 10th season in Columbus, and has a 100-21 mark as the Buckeyes' head coach.

Aside from Joe Paterno, is there another current FBS coach in the country that has had as much of a positive influence on his university than Tressel at Ohio State? If there is, good luck finding that person.

Going by Ohio State standards, Tressel should be judged based on three criteria: Wins over the hated rival Michigan, Big Ten titles, and national championships.

When Tressel was introduced to the Buckeye faithful as the replacement to John Cooper, he vowed to beat Michigan. In his first season, one that saw Ohio State lose a second straight Outback Bowl to South Carolina, he took the Buckeyes to The Big House, beat Michigan, and cost the Wolverines a Big Ten title.

In fact, Tressel's record against whom Woody Hayes referred to as "That School Up North" is 8-1. The lone defeat was in 2003, a season Ohio State still managed to win a BCS game.

Tressel has won either a share of or outright six Big Ten titles, including each of the last five. Three of those six are outright. Another shared with Iowa was a season the Buckeyes won all eight of their conference games.

Speaking of that 2002, it didn't matter how Ohio State was winning games. It won them – 14 to be exact.

That 14th victory just happened to be in the 2003 Fiesta Bowl, and it was the first national championship the Buckeyes won since the Hayes era.

What made that game so significant in the college football landscape was the Miami team he beat was a defending national champion and carried a 34-game winning streak into Tempe, Ariz., that night.

If the saying goes, "To be the best, you got to beat the best," well, Tressel and the Buckeyes beat the Hurricanes, who

were considered the best.

Ohio State may not have won any national championships since hoisting the crystal football in January 2003, but the Buckeyes did play in the first two BCS National Championship Games against Florida and LSU.

Tressel's bowl record at Ohio State might just be 5-4. But consider that in addition to his 2002-03 national title, three of those victories include two Fiesta Bowls over Kansas State and Notre Dame, and a Rose Bowl win over Oregon last season.

In fact, that game against the Ducks was the first time in 13 years the Buckeyes had played that New Year's Day game in Pasadena, Calif. It might not be a national championship, but at Ohio State (and any other Big Ten school), a Rose Bowl victory is the next best thing.

Is Tressel perfect? No, he has his flaws. Before winning the Rose Bowl nine months ago, he and his program were mightily blamed nationwide for the Big Ten's struggles in bowls given the aforementioned losses to Florida and LSU, as well as a last-minute loss to Texas in the 2009 Fiesta Bowl.

Amazingly, Tressel also has not won a Big Ten Coach of the Year. Not once.

But with all that said, no one can dispute his impact on the Big Ten, or in college football.

And yet here we are. It's October 11, 2010. Tressel has 100 victories at Ohio State, and at this moment, he coaches the No. 1 team in the land.

When the book is written on Tressel, it should not matter how much "better" Ohio State's resources are compared to other Big Ten teams, or other teams, period. It should not matter whether the Buckeyes land more blue-chip recruits than anyone else.

Ohio State might be one of the most prestigious coaching spots in college football, and for all the pressure and expectations there are in Columbus, Tressel has delivered.

And as long as "Sweater Vest" is on the sidelines, don't expect the Buckeyes to just disappear anytime soon.

10/4/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 6 (premium)

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By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

One week into conference play, and the Big Ten now has four teams – No. 18 Michigan, No. 17 Michigan State, Northwestern, and No. 2 Ohio State – that all remain undefeated.

A lot is made nationally about the starts about both the Buckeyes and Wolverines. Ohio State has basically lived up to its hype as a national title contender through five weeks, even though the Buckeyes received a bit of a scare in their 24-13 win at Illinois on Oct. 12. Michigan, on the other hand, has a quarterback in Denard Robinson that is stealing headlines week after week and has slowly become perhaps the best athlete in all of college football.

But it's these other two 5-0 squads that are intriguing, and

perhaps the rest of the country should be taking notice.

Michigan State and Northwestern may not have the tradition of an Ohio State or Michigan, but that shouldn't take away from the accomplishments of either program this season. In fact, the argument could be made for both the Spartans and Wildcats that it was only a matter of time before this happened.

Mark Dantonio and Pat Fitzgerald are solid Big Ten coaches, and to be honest, neither really receives the praise they both clearly deserve. Both have worked wonders to get their programs to this point.

Let's start with Dantonio, who is in his fourth season at Michigan State. When he first arrived in East Lansing, Mich., that football program was a train wreck. It was as if The Titanic hit the iceberg when that 2006 version of the Spartans absolutely unraveled in a nationally televised home game against Notre Dame. Aside from a miracle comeback win at Northwestern that season, Michigan State was just in shambles.

Dantonio came in, and during his first season, there were incredibly low expectations nationally. So what does he do? Dantonio guides the Spartans to a 7-5 season and a trip to the Champs Sports Bowl against Boston College. In fact, Michigan State has been in a bowl game every year under Dantonio.

Last season may have been a forgettable one in East Lansing, but that never should have carried any weight when looking at this season.

Folks, this Michigan State team has played like one that should be ranked 17th in the country, and maybe even higher. Even with Dantonio dealing with health issues, this team has found a way to win big games.

Just hours before Dantonio suffered his heart attack, he made the gutsy fake field-goal call that wound up paying off in a 34-31 win over Notre Dame. Then with him in the hospital this

past week after suffering a setback, Michigan State beat Wisconsin at home 34-24.

It's obvious that this group of Spartan players are feeding off of Dantonio positively, and that's what makes this team so scary entering the second half of the season. That, and the fact that Ohio State is absent from its schedule.

Ironically, this week's game at "The Big House" falls on the 11th anniversary of the last time both Michigan and Michigan State faced each other with identical 5-0 records. On Oct. 9, 1999, the Spartans defeated the Wolverines at Spartan Stadium, 34-31.

A third straight win for the Spartans over their in-state rival could potentially lead to a showdown of epic proportions later this month.

Which leads to the perfect spot to discuss Fitzgerald, who is in his fifth season as Northwestern's head coach.

It has been well-documented how purple is in Fitzgerald's blood, between being an all-American linebacker for the Wildcats and now being the face of that program. He took over under extreme conditions with the sudden death of Randy Walker in 2006. Through all the adversity, Fitzgerald has made Northwestern a very respectable program in the conference.

Like Michigan State, Northwestern also possesses a 5-0 record heading into its home game this week against Purdue, who is just reeling right now.

Also like the Spartans, the Wildcats dodge Ohio State this season. In fact, Northwestern dodges both the Buckeyes and the Michigan Wolverines, that other undefeated Big Ten team.

Looks like a pretty good year for this to happen.

The Wildcats' 29-28 win over Minnesota last weekend might have been ugly, but it doesn't matter. It's still a win.

Northwestern has found ways to win close games time after time, and that is a direct reflection of what Fitzgerald has done to revive the culture surrounding the Wildcats and their fans.

With a bye coming up next week, a victory over the Boilermakers on Oct. 9 would have Northwestern bowl-eligible for the third straight season. This, by the way, has NEVER happened in that program's history. Ever.

Circle the date of Oct. 23. That day, there's a chance Dantonio brings his 7-0 Spartans to Ryan Field in Evanston, Ill., for a game of epic proportions against Fitzgerald and his 6-0 Wildcats.

7-0 Michigan State vs. 6-0 Northwestern. Let that thought sink in for a minute.

It's time to acknowledge the following: As long as Dantonio and Fitzgerald are in their current positions, Michigan State and Northwestern are two Big Ten programs to be reckoned with, both now, and in the seasons to come.

9/27/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 5 (premium)

Every Monday, we will be running a weekly series titled "State of the Big Ten," which will be made available to all members of HawkeyeDrive.com. This series of columns will focus on one major headline regarding the conference and go in-depth on the subject at hand.

By Brendan Stiles

With the exception of two teams (Illinois and Indiana), the Big Ten is now done with non-conference games and everybody can start shifting their attention to Big Ten play.

Right now, 2010 has been the year of the quarterback in this conference.

As expected, No. 2 Ohio State has been the cream of the crop. The Buckeyes have not just been winning games, but they are scoring at will on opponents. Through four games, Ohio State has 197 points. Junior quarterback Terrelle Pryor has played out of his mind, as he currently has 14 touchdowns to his name – 10 passing, three rushing, and one touchdown reception coming against Eastern Michigan last week. He might not be the front-runner for the Heisman Trophy just yet, but he is definitely in the conversation.

A lot was made about quarterback play in general going into this season throughout the entire conference. Teams like the Buckeyes, Wisconsin, and Iowa, for instance, were all bringing back signal-callers who won bowl games last season.

As of now, the Big Ten has seven quarterbacks ranked in the top 20 nationally in QB rating, including four of the top seven.

The national leader in this category, surprisingly, is not Pryor, Wisconsin's Scott Tolzien, or Iowa's Ricky Stanzi. No, it's Northwestern junior Dan Persa, the heir apparent to who some Northwestern fans argue was one of the school's best ever in Mike Kafka.

Persa has completed an absurd 85-of-106 passes through four games. To put this into perspective, Persa only threw for 37 yards against Iowa last season and was more of a threat running the football in that 17-10 Wildcat victory. Persa, along with Minnesota's Adam Weber, are the only two Big Ten

quarterbacks who have already thrown for 1,000 yards this season. He has eight touchdown passes to just one interception, and his 186.3 quarterback rating is the best in the country. Not just the Big Ten, but the entire country.

One yard shy of that 1,000-yard plateau for passing is Stanzi. The Iowa senior has completed exactly two-thirds of his attempts this season through four games, with 66 completions on 99 attempts. What's even more impressive about Stanzi, however, is his touchdown-to-interception ratio. In 2009, he threw 17 touchdowns to 15 picks. This season, he has nine touchdown passes to just one interception. His 179.4 quarterback rating is fourth nationally.

Right behind Stanzi with a 179.0 QB rating is Indiana's Ben Chappell. Although the Hoosiers have only played three games this season, Chappell currently has a 72.4 completion percentage (71-of-98 passing), and has accumulated 890 yards through the air. Not only that, but the Indiana signal-caller has only been sacked twice and has yet to throw a pick.

Tolzien ranks seventh nationally with a 176.2 rating. Although he only has five touchdown passes to four interceptions thus far, the Badger QB has also completed 76.2 percent of his throws.

Pryor, who has already been mentioned, ranks 12th nationally in quarterback rating, and joining him at 16th and 17th nationally are Michigan State's Kirk Cousins and Michigan's Denard Robinson.

Cousins is currently 61-of-91 passing this season for 863 yards, while Robinson is 57-of-80 for 731 yards.

But the talk with Robinson isn't so much about his arm, but his feet.

Through four games, Robinson leads the country in rushing yards with 688 of them. He also has six touchdowns on the

ground, including an 87-yard score during a 28-24 win at Notre Dame on Sept. 11. Again, he's a quarterback.

But his ability as a dual-threat is why Michigan head coach Rich Rodriguez went to him as his starting signal-caller, and with the Wolverines currently sitting at 4-0 and ranked 19th, that ended up being a wise move.

As for the league's other quarterbacks, here's what can be said. Minnesota has been atrocious, but senior Adam Weber hasn't played as awful as his team's 1-3 record would indicate. As mentioned, he already has over 1,000 yards passing for the Golden Gophers this season.

The other three teams – Illinois, Penn State, and Purdue – are all breaking in newcomers. Illinois and Penn State both have freshmen starting in Nathan Scheelhaase and Rob Bolden, respectively. Purdue, on the other hand, was counting on Miami (Fla.) transfer Robert Marve to come in and be the guy. However, injuries to his left knee may keep Marve out for the near future, which could hurt the Boilermakers down the road.

There's a reason why people say the quarterback is the most important position on the field. Looking at the Big Ten teams that appear capable of reaching bowl games, a big reason why is the play at that position.

As long as QB performances remain strong throughout the course of conference play, the Big Ten will continue to be perceived as nationally as one of the top conferences in college football this season.

9/20/2010: State of the Big Ten, Volume 4 (premium)

Every Monday, we will be running a weekly series titled "State of the Big Ten," which will be made available to all members of HawkeyeDrive.com. This series of columns will focus on one major headline regarding the conference and go in-depth on the subject at hand.

By Brendan Stiles

HawkeyeDrive.com

As the month of September winds down, the Big Ten enters a week that quite possibly has the worst slate of college football games for the conference in recent memory.

Ten Big Ten teams will all be playing at home on Sept. 25, playing either a team from the Mid-American Conference (MAC) or an Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) opponent.

Indiana plays Akron, No. 18 Iowa plays Ball State, No. 21 Michigan plays Bowling Green, No. 25 Michigan State plays Northern Colorado, Minnesota plays Northern Illinois, Northwestern plays Central Michigan, No. 2 Ohio State plays Eastern Michigan, No. 23 Penn State plays Temple, Purdue plays Toledo, and No. 11 Wisconsin plays Austin Peay.

Now, it should be noted that the Big Ten has had recent history of match-ups with MAC schools over the years. In fact, Wisconsin is the only Big Ten team not to play a MAC opponent in 2010.

The problem is not Big Ten teams facing these programs. Everyone understands it is all about money, and every BCS conference program wants to schedule 7-8 home games every year.

No, the problem is having all these match-ups during the same week of the season. It is pathetic.

Every other week thus far during the 2010 season has featured at least one marquee match-up featuring a Big Ten team. What's that match-up this coming Saturday? Probably Penn State-Temple ... by default.

Not because it is an in-state rivalry like Iowa-Iowa State, but because Temple might be the MAC's best team while Penn State looks like it may be regressing from its 11-2 season in 2009.

How exactly is the Big Ten thinking it is showcasing itself with these selections of match-ups? Seriously.

The only thing worse the Big Ten could do is actually have one of these 10 teams in action this week play its respective opponent on the road.

This stems as a direct result of the Big Ten pushing its conference season back a week, so it now concludes Thanksgiving weekend. Because of that, these are the match-ups being shown before everyone opens conference play next week.

And once Nebraska joins the conference in 2011, more scenarios such as what is on tap this week will happen again and again in future years. The way the Big Ten set up its conference schedules for 2011 and 2012, both seasons are going to carry over to Thanksgiving weekend.

Picture being in the shoes of an Illinois fan this week. Not only are the Fighting Illini not playing this weekend (which they ought to be commended for, honestly), but chances are, no Illinois fan likes the idea of having to decide whether to watch Ohio State-Eastern Michigan or Penn State-Temple at 2:30 p.m. on Saturday because those are the only two games at that time featuring a Big Ten team.

Also keep in mind with this scenario that in a strange coincidence, the Fighting Illini's first two Big Ten opponents are, yep, Ohio State and Penn State.

Now if there is any good news, it is that Big Ten play starts next week. Otherwise, what is the Big Ten thinking here?

Games this weekend that sound much more enticing are Miami-Pittsburgh, Alabama-Arkansas, Oregon State-Boise State, Virginia Tech-Boston College, California-Arizona, Stanford-Notre Dame, just to name a few.

And guess what? All those other BCS conferences have a chance to showcase themselves in a manner this weekend that the Big Ten will not be able to with the games it has.

The conference has had match-ups already like Illinois-Missouri, Michigan-Connecticut, Penn State-Alabama, Ohio State-Miami, Iowa-Arizona, Minnesota-USC, and Wisconsin-Arizona State. And now the Big Ten goes from all of that to this?

If the Big Ten is looking to earn respect, this is not how it is going to be done successfully. There should be at least one marquee non-conference game every week in the season where there are no conference games.

Again, it is not so much the specific match-ups this week. It is that all of them are this week.

9/13/2010: State of the Big

Ten, Volume 3 (premium)

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By Brendan Stiles

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If BCS conferences were like people, the Big Ten and Pac-10 would be like brothers.

These two conferences have some of the proudest tradition in all of college football. One has powers like Ohio State and Michigan. The other features schools with defining legacies like USC and Washington. They have provided fans of both conferences with memorable Rose Bowls over the past century-plus.

This week, the Big Ten and Pac-10 will have three games against each other featuring respective schools. Minnesota will host No. 18 USC, No. 11 Wisconsin will host Arizona State, and No. 9 Iowa travels to Tucson, Ariz., to play the 24th-ranked Arizona Wildcats.

Over the past decade, the Big Ten has struggled against the Pac-10 head-to-head. In 51 meetings between Big Ten and Pac-10 schools, the Pac-10 has gone 31-20. This record includes a 9-4 showing against the Big Ten in bowl games.

Simply put, these three games are the most important for the Big Ten to have strong showings in.

Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin account for a combined seven of those 20 Big Ten victories against Pac-10 teams the last 10 years. That's 35 percent.

In fact, the Badgers have performed the best against the Pac-10, winning four out of five games. The only other Big Ten team with a winning record is Ohio State, who has compiled a 5-3 record that includes the Big Ten's only Rose Bowl win over the Pac-10. Iowa and Indiana are both .500, with the Hawkeyes 2-2 and the Hoosiers 1-1.

Unless both conferences send teams to the 2011 Rose Bowl, these will be the only three games all season featuring the Big Ten and Pac-10 squaring off.

Let's start with Minnesota. The Golden Gophers are the for sure underdog of the Big Ten's main trio this weekend. Although its game against USC is at home, Minnesota is coming off an embarrassing 41-38 loss to South Dakota. An FCS opponent. The Trojans, meanwhile, have been the nemesis of the Big Ten, compiling an 8-0 record against five different schools during the 10-year stretch mentioned.

If the Golden Gophers have any hope of salvaging their 2010 season, they need to win this game.

A Minnesota win on Sept. 18 would remove a bulk of the bad taste coming from a loss to South Dakota. It would signify the depth of the Big Ten and help make it a more respectable conference.

It would also be the type of victory inside TCF Bank Stadium that Tim Brewster would need to dodge further questions about his job security.

As for Wisconsin, its game against Arizona State is one the Badgers should win, especially with it occurring at Camp Randall Stadium. Wisconsin is one of the conference's top teams this season, and as mentioned earlier, has fared extremely well against the Pac-10. Its last game against a Pac-10 opponent came back in 2007, when the Badgers opened that season with a home victory over Washington State.

The Sun Devils might not be in the upper echelon of the Pac-10 this season, but Arizona State is currently 2-0, and has had success against the Big Ten in recent memory. This includes victories over Iowa, Northwestern (twice), and a 2004 Sun Bowl win against Purdue.

Home wins against programs such as USC and Arizona State this coming weekend would show progress from the Big Ten, especially after the spark the conference was provided after Ohio State defeated Oregon in 2010 Rose Bowl.

Finally, there's the biggest game of the three between Iowa and Arizona. Not only is this the one road game for the Big Ten, but it's also the only FBS game on Sept. 18 in the entire country featuring both teams nationally ranked.

Last season, the Hawkeyes defeated the Wildcats inside Kinnick Stadium, 27-17. Both Iowa and Arizona are older and more experienced squads after coming off seasons where both played in bowl games.

Of the three Big Ten teams, Iowa perhaps has the most pressure on it to win this weekend given the circumstances.

The Hawkeyes looked abysmal in its last road game against a Pac-10 opponent, a 44-7 loss at Arizona State in 2004. Some of the same factors entering that particular game, such as a late kickoff time and desert heat, will be intangibles that work against Iowa this weekend.

While Arizona is one of the few Pac-10 teams this past decade to not fare well against Big Ten opponents, the Wildcats might be the best of the Pac-10's three representatives this weekend. Familiarity with the Hawkeyes from 2009 should help Arizona, while home-and-homes have begun with those other two match-ups.

Much like last week with Michigan, Ohio State, and Penn State playing marquee games, getting out of these three marquee

games against Pac-10 schools with at least two wins would be beneficial to the Big Ten.

It's not just about winning non-conference games and bowl games as far as conference reputation is concerned. It's also which teams Big Ten schools are beating in these contests. Considering the lack of success against the Pac-10, wins this weekend against teams like Arizona, Arizona State, and USC would be enormous for the Big Ten moving forward.

Michigan beating Notre Dame and Ohio State being Miami (Fla.) are both great for the Big Ten. But neither is going to have the satisfaction that comes with beating a team from what has proven to be a more superior conference on the gridiron in the Pac-10.

This is the last set of non-conference games the Big Ten can legitimately showcase before bowl season. The conference is dependent on Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin to represent it proudly on Sept. 18.